

Saturdays by orphan_account

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"She's spent all week waiting for triple-decker Eggo breakfasts, slow rock on the radio, and most importantly, her friends."

In which Eleven reflects on her favorite day of the week, and how it's spent with her favorite people.

Saturdays

It's January, and Eleven still doesn't understand why, if Hopper is her Papa now, she can't live just like everyone else.

"How much longer?" She asks, staring out the window of their cabin. The glass is encrusted with ferns of frost, and she absentmindedly draws a frowning face in the ice.

"Just one more year, okay kiddo?" Hopper (*Papa*) replies, "We gotta make sure it's safe. You can hold out that long, right?"

"Yes."

No.

"Good. Now come eat your breakfast."

El begrudgingly trudges over to the table. Sure, she *can* wait, but she doesn't *want* to. How could she? Things aren't okay, not really. She's still only halfway happy. She still has to be hidden away. Still frustrated.

And yet...

She'd be lying if she said things were as bad as they were before,

because they're not. She's not as lonely. She's not as isolated. She doesn't have to fear that her friends will forget about her, or that they'll replace her. She has hope.

She has Saturdays.

"You ready for today?" Papa asks as they take their seats at the spindly table.

"Yes!" El replies, more enthusiastically than before. She's spent all week waiting for triple-decker Eggo breakfasts, slow rock on the radio, and most importantly, her *friends*.

On Saturdays, Papa drives her to Mike's house and lets her spend the whole day there. Will, Lucas, and Dustin will come too. They'll play board games, watch the morning cartoons, goof around, catch up on their weeks, and sometimes play Will or Dustin's *Atari* (depending on who's more in the mood to lug it over to Mike's house).

Max likes to spend Saturdays with them too, and El has to admit that she isn't as bad as she first thought. Max offered to teach her how to skateboard, and when El had levitated something in front of her for the first time (an action Dustin was prone to ask for, despite Mike's protests that Dustin could just get off his ass and get the dropped d20 dice himself), Max hadn't called her a freak. "You're like, awesome," she'd said matter-of-factly. Eleven had appreciated it more than Max probably knew.

But as much as El loves spending time with all her friends, there's something special about what comes afterward. After dinner time

(which is usually better than Papa's cooking). After the late winter sun sets, and the street-lamps illuminate the glittering snow. After Lucas, Dustin, Max, and Will say their goodbyes, and head off into the night, leaving a shuffled map of footprints on the snowy front lawn.

Afterwards, El and Mike get to spend the rest of the night together, just the two of them. It's different then when they're with everyone else. El doesn't feel as weird about wanting to hold Mike's hand or cuddle up next to him. Mike is less worried about making sure everyone in the group is having a good time and he can finally relax.

Papa still isn't thrilled about these one-on-one visits with Mike, as he not-so-subtly lets her know on a regular basis. Like today, for example.

"What do you and that Wheeler kid get up to anyways?" He asks gruffly. His fingers drum on the side of his coffee cup, though El can tell he's trying to appear casual.

Eleven shrugs in response, her mouth full of whipped cream, waffle, and chocolate chips as she answers, "Talking."

"Talking?"

"Talking," El repeats, trying not to smile as she nudges her waffle with her fork. She knows that Papa's just worrying about her, like he always does, but he doesn't have to. Mike would never hurt her.

Besides, she's telling the truth. They *do* talk. They talk in his living room, in his basement, in the secret crawlspace in his attic that only Mike knows about, in his room. Most times, the conversation ends with discussing everything that happened in the year they were apart. El still has yet to share some of her darker moments with him, but Mike doesn't seem to mind. He understands.

"That's it?" Papa asks, chewing food on one side of mouth as his gaze scrutinizes her. "Just talking? All by yourselves?"

"Movies," El offers, which is also true. Maybe even more than talking, El adores the nights spent on Mike's living room sofa, captivated by whatever VHS rental he'd gotten for that week.

During these movie nights, she gets to see more members of Mike's family, like Nancy, who always has a smile for her (not always for Mike, though). Holly often tries to join their movie-watching on the couch, but Mike bribes her with candy to leave them alone (not before Holly gives El a hug though, as she always does).

His parents are usually confused as to El's presence, but Mike is always ready to rattle off the sedative excuse that she's from another school. He also conveniently leaves out the part that "El from another school," is the same "dangerous Russian spy" that they were warned to avoid a year earlier. His parents also still have yet to question why El always arrives in a Hawkins police cruiser, but then again, it's rare that his father isn't napping/at work/or "not interested," or that his mother isn't busy/in the bath/or "not interested."

"What kinda movies?" Papa asks.

El shrugs again. “Ghosts. Outer Space. Sharks.”

The last movie they watched was “R-Rated” which, according to Mike, meant that it was “Really Good.” His mother rarely ever let him rent these kinds of movies, so it was a “Big Deal.”

“I think you’ll really like it,” Mike had said, kneeling in front of the TV as El had waited on the couch.

“Is it scary?” She’d asked hesitantly.

“Not a lot.”

El gave him a look.

“You’ll be fine!” Mike assured her. He put the VHS tape in the player and joined her on the couch, slumping back casually in his seat. “It’s not that bad.”

“That’s what you said last time,” El grumbled, leaning her head on his shoulder.

“Because I forgot about that one part!”

El smiled wryly, but let the conversation slide. Even if she did get

scared (which she didn't, not *a lot*), Mike was there.

They were about ten minutes into the movie (which was kinda scary) when Mike had spoken up.

"When you don't have to live in hiding anymore, we can go to a real theater."

"Theater?" El echoed. Her brow furrowed as she turned her head to look up at him.

"A movie theatre," Mike elaborated, "Basically, you get to go pay and see movies, only it's not like on TV. They use a projector, so it's really big! Like, bigger than the wall! You sit in this big dark room, and there's lots of seats and popcorn and stuff. We have one downtown."

"Oh," El answered quietly. Mike had continued to watch the movie while she pulled up her knees to her chest, feeling a somber mix of both fascination and defeat. Going to a theater sounded like fun, and yet it was just another item to add to the list of *not yet's*.

Can I go to school?

Not yet.

Can Mike take me to the arcade?

Not yet.

Can I go sledding in the park with my friends?

Not yet.

Not yet, not yet, not yet.

El jabs at her waffle with a little more force than necessary. “Have you been to a theater?” She suddenly asks, looking up at Hopper.

“Yeah,” Papa takes a sip of his coffee and eyes her. “Why?”

“Mike wants to take me.”

He holds eye contact with her as he swallows his drink and lowers his mug once more. “You know you guys can’t do that,” he finally says, “You gotta stay indoors.”

“I know,” El replies, trying to keep her voice steady. “But...I want to.”

“And I want you *safe*,” Papa says sternly, “You’re lucky his parents

haven't turned you in. You know how much trouble I could get in trouble for lying to them?"

"I know!"

"Okay!" His voice has risen a bit, and he slumps back, collecting himself. "Okay."

El looks down at her lap. "Sorry."

"It's ok," Papa assures her, "I know you don't like it, but it's better to be safe than sorry, right?"

"Right," El nods.

"And it's not like last time. No more 'soon's', okay?"

"Okay."

There's a moment of silence as the two continue their breakfasts. El feels her cheeks grow warm with shame — she knows she shouldn't bother Papa with all her questions, she really does, but it just gets so hard sometimes.

She opens her mouth to apologize again, still feeling guilty, but Papa

cuts her off before she can.

“You almost finished?” He asks, motioning to her plate with his fork. “It’s almost 7:30. We gotta get going.”

This brightens up El immensely. Pushing aside her discontentment, she eagerly finishes off the rest of her waffles, darts up from the table, deposits her plate in the sink, and dashes to her room to grab her coat.

“I’m ready!” She says breathlessly, trying to tie her snow boots as her winter hat haphazardly sits atop her head.

“Jesus, kid.” Hopper gives a huff of a laugh and steps forward to adjust her cap. “Let me get my coat.”

He does, and they leave, boarding into the Hawkins’ police car parked a little ways away from the cabin. The car is even colder than the cabin, and as El buckles herself in, she can see her breath fog.

Papa starts the car up, an unlit cigarette hanging from his mouth. The heating fans hum to life and the car is warmed with the familiar scent of old leather and nicotine.

El keeps her gaze out the window, admiring the snowy landscape as Papa hums along to the radio. As they near Hawkins, she feels her excitement only go stronger, filling her and making her toes curl.

“You’re really this pumped up for talking and movies?” Papa teases, glancing at her, “It sounds kinda boring to me.”

“We do more stuff,” El insists, throwing him a teasing look right back.

“Like what?”

El thinks for a moment. “Reading.”

“Reading?”

El understands the question he’s not asking. The one he’s probably too worried about her feelings to ask.

“He’s helping me,” she explains.

These reading sessions started a few weeks ago, during one of El and Mike’s nightly talks in his room. El would never admit it (*especially* not to Papa), but she loved spending time in there. Everything about it was just so...*Mike*.

She couldn’t really explain it, but she knew she always felt safe there. She knew that every time she came over, the wallpaper would still be the same muted navy blue. The walls would still be accented with

posters from various movies and science fairs. The wooden bunk bed would still rest in the corner, though the lower bunk wasn't much of a resting place. Instead, it served as a landing pad for Mike's spare sheets, clothing, comic books, candy wrappers, and other junk that his mother hadn't gotten him to clean up yet.

Mike apologizes for the mess every time, and El never minds.

On the night in question, El was examining his bookshelf — a bulky, wooden thing stuffed with glossy, floppy comics and dog-eared novels, nestled beside the bunks — as Mike recounted a highly-detailed summary of the latest *Dragon's Lair* conquest.

"Max still has the high score, but Dustin is *this close* to beating her!" Mike had babbled, pinching his fingers close together for emphasis. He was sitting on the bed, facing her profile. "He got completely screwed over by the Mud Monsters though, and he *totally* lost it!"

El, curious, picked a book off the shelf, though she was pretty certain as to what she'd find inside.

Sure enough, when she opened the page, words, set firmly in ink, stared back at her. Most of them she recognized, but the rest were nothing more than a complicated series of shapes and symbols, a foreign code she'd forgotten, a fragmented series of off-key notes. Trying to read them was jarring and felt like the one time Papa's car engine gave out and he had to jumpstart it over and over again.

"My dad used to read me that," Mike had said, pausing in his impression of what an angered Dustin sounded like (high-pitched

whining, mostly). “The book, I mean. Like, a long time ago. When I was still little and stuff. Back before he turned into such a...”

His voice trailed off as he struggled to think of the right word, and El’s gaze left the book to look up at him.

“Wasteoid,” Mike decided. “So, do you like *Treasure Island*?”

El hesitated. “I’m not sure. I haven’t — “ She didn’t want to finish the sentence. The familiar burn of frustration made her grip on the book tighten, and she suddenly felt so *stupid*. “Never mind,” she frowned, shutting the book hastily. “It’s stupid.”

“El!” Mike exclaimed, jumping up from the bed and yanking her into a hug. Her face was shoved into his shoulder and the book awkwardly squeezed in between their stomachs, but the hug was appreciated all the same. “It’s ok! You’re not stupid. Not everyone knows how to.”

“I know how,” El mumbled into his shoulder (when had he grown so tall?). “It’s just hard.”

“Well, I can help you, if you want,” Mike offered, pulling back to look her in the eye. He kept his hands on her shoulders and gave her a genuine smile, the kind that always made El feel warm inside.

“How?” She’d asked, looking up at him curiously.

And so it began.

Reading, as it would turn out, was even better than video games, talking, or movies. Mike, propped up against a small summit of pillows with Eleven lying at his side, read *Treasure Island* aloud to her. They'd laid on the top bunk of his bed, huddled close together. The room was dim, illuminated only by the few lamps in his room and the soft glow of the street lamps filtering in through his window.

"It was one January morning, very early — a pinching, frosty morning — the cove all grey with hoar-frost, the ripple lapping softly on the stones, the sun still low and only touching the hilltops and shining far to seaward.

"The captain had risen earlier than usual and set out down the beach, his cutlass swinging under the broad skirts of the old blue coat, his brass telescope under his arm, his hat tilted back upon his head."

El's head was pressed into the crook of his arm, and she found that she could *feel* his words before she heard them. The once-fragmented notes instead reverberated low in his chest, filling her ears with a pleasant hum. Her eyes followed the words as Mike read them, studying, memorizing.

"I remember his breath hanging like smoke in his wake as he strode off, and the last sound I heard of him as he turned the big rock was a loud snort of indignation, as though his mind was still running upon Dr. Livesey."

She mouthed some of the trickier words, repeating them to herself in the faintest of whispers. *Indignation. Cutlass. Hoar-frost.* She was so quiet and still, at one point, Mike thought she had fallen asleep.

“You still there?” He’d asked, pausing to look down at her.

“Uh huh,” she’d nodded.

“You’re not bored, or anything?”

“*Mike.*” El gave him a look. “Keep going.”

“Just making sure!”

He’d continued reading, and even though El’s eyelids grew heavy and her mind hazy, she’d held onto every word as if her life depended on it.

Mike read to her until Papa came to pick her up. The time came, as it always did, too soon. The languid spell they’d been cast under broke with the rumble of tires crushing the freshly fallen snow in the driveway. The car horn beeped twice, and Mike and El flinched apart.

“Guess you gotta go,” Mike said unhelpfully.

El gave him a small, half-smile and nodded. "I'll be back soon," she told him, and though she dislikes the word, she only used "soon," because she knew it was true.

Mike helped her grab her hat, coat, and boots, making sure she was snugly secure in all of them. As his father napped on the Lay-Z-Boy and his mother chatted on the kitchen phone, he then escorted El outside.

The familiar brown police car awaited in the Wheeler's driveway, headlights cutting into the darkness, illuminating the falling blanket of late-winter snow.

El and Mike glanced at the car before looking at each other, preparing for the umpteenth goodbye shared between them.

"We can finish the book next time!" Mike offered, giving El that adorably earnest smile once more. "Or even the time after that. I dunno, it depends on how fast I can read. But only if you want to."

El smiled back at him gratefully and nodded. "Thanks, Mike."

Mike nodded and pulled her in for a hug, though this one was notably better than the first. This time, El wrapped her arms around him too, holding onto him as tightly as if it was the last time.

His cheeks were rosy from the cold, speckled with freckles and snowflakes. El shivered when his face brushed against hers but didn't

let go.

“See you Saturday,” Mike mumbled into her hat.

“Saturday,” El echoed.

They moved back slightly, and El pressed her lips to his cheek in a quick kiss. Her mouth tingled afterward in the best of ways, and she smiled as Mike’s pink cheeks grew even redder.

Papa had honked his horn again, which caused Mike to jolt up as quickly and reactionary as if he’d been yanked up by a string. “Bye!” He’d said hastily.

They’d waved goodbye, El had boarded the car, and she hadn’t been able to stop smiling all the ride home.

El hangs onto that moment — that vibrant, radiant, perfect moment. If she concentrates on it hard enough, she sometimes can put herself right back in it, navy wallpaper, hoar-frost, rosy cheeks, tingling skin.

There are times when she fears that none of this is real, that one morning she’ll wake up back in the laboratory. That Mike, Papa, Lucas, Max, Will, and Dustin will cease to exist, or even worse, never have existed at all.

She takes a breath, digs her nails into the passenger’s seat of Papa’s

cruiser. His hand is resting on the gear shift, and she ever-so-quickly brushes her fingers against the back of his hand.

Still real.

She feels herself relax into her seat, and it's only then that she realizes Papa is talking to her.

"So he reads with you?" He's asking. He throws her a glance and looks bemused, which makes El smile.

"Yes," she answers, shaking herself out of her thoughts. "He's really good."

"Well, that's nice of him." The car makes the turn into Mike's neighborhood, and El feels her heartbeat quicken. "Just as long as he behaves himself, okay?"

El feels herself flush pink. "He does! It's just reading."

"That's all it better be," Hopper says warningly, though El can tell he's trying his best not to smile.

"I promise," El assures him, and this time when she reaches to touch his hand, she gives it a reassuring squeeze.

The car's dashboard reads 8 AM as Papa pulls to a stop in front of the Wheeler's house. El can already see the four sets of footprints leading to the front door, a clear indication her other friends have already arrived.

"You got some good friends, you know that?" Papa says, motioning to the house.

"I know," El smiles, unbuckling her seatbelt.

"And you know you can call me if you need anything?"

"Uh huh."

"And you'll tell that Wheeler kid to keep his hands to himself?"

"Yes!" El blushes bright red.

"I'll take him to down the precinct if you need me to."

"Papa!"

"I'm kidding! Mostly."

El nudges his arm as he laughs. He always teases her like this, and it never fails to fluster her.

“Alright kid, get out of here,” Papa says after his laughs die down, “Your fan club is waiting.”

He motions to the window and El pauses to glance over her shoulder. Sure enough, she can see Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Will, and Max all pushing past each other to look out the front window of the Wheeler’s home. When they catch her looking at them, they wave excitedly, beckoning her inside.

El beams at them and waves back, laughing for reasons she’s not quite sure of. It’s still foreign to her, these feelings of pure, unadulterated happiness. Maybe one day, she’ll understand it. Maybe these radiant moments won’t seem so unfamiliar, or so good that she’ll have to wonder whether she’s dreaming or not.

Maybe one day.

Not yet.